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István Aranyosi

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# Quantifier vs. Poetry: Stylistic Impoverishment and Socio-Cultural Estrangement of Anglo-American Philosophy in the Last Hundred Years

ISTVÁN ARANYOSI

*Bilkent University*

THE MAIN TITLE OF THIS PAPER is an allusion to Jeremy Bentham's famous one-page piece "Push-Pin versus Poetry," where the father of utilitarianism argued that there is no reason to think that the very straightforward game of push-pin, popular in England and Scotland in the nineteenth century, has less value than a fancy activity like poetry reading. In a reversal of the terms of the analogy, my point will be that there was a time, not so long ago, when professional philosophers did have equal consideration for both logic and poetry, by which I mean for both good arguments and elegant prose.

In the not very numerous magazine articles, editorials, and opinion pieces in the popular press where current mainstream, one might say "analytic," Anglo-American philosophy is ever mentioned and discussed, there is a frequent complaint that this discipline has estranged itself from either the other humanities, or social sciences, or hard sciences, and that, as a result, the image of philosophy in the contemporary world is one of a discipline that is disconnected from reality, a veritable inbreeding academic cottage industry of empty scholasticism. In a recent opinion piece written for *Inside Higher Ed*, a popular online platform dedicated to academic affairs, Rutgers philosopher Jason Stanley complained that

[m]ost American humanists are unclear about how the debates of philosophers are supposed to fit into the overall project of the humanities. We are ignored at dinner parties, and considered arrogant and perhaps uncouth. To add insult to injury, the name of our profession is liberally bestowed on those teaching in completely different departments. (Stanley)

To be clear, Stanley's general complaint in his piece is not the same as the one I have mentioned above, but a second-order complaint: the complaint

against the outsiders' complaint that philosophy has isolated itself from both the public and the other humanities, and the ensuing alleged behavior on their part. However, here and there, he seems to agree that philosophy's estrangement is a fact. He says: "That philosophy has become estranged from the humanities is ironic. Philosophy has shaped the modernity in which its role has been supplanted by the anthropology of the other" (Stanley).

Is there some way of getting closer to a more informed way of assessing this type of complaint? Those of us involved in current research in mainstream philosophy have, of course, a large stock of personal experience that serves as a basis of judgment regarding these issues; we normally read a lot, referee papers for professional journals and books for academic publishers, attend conferences and workshops, and write and sometimes publish as well. It is clear that each of us has a hunch about the issue, but is there some way to judge the matter that is less personal and whose basis is more accessible to the public?

I would like to present a few simple statistical data that I have collected, that might be an indication that philosophy, as reflected in papers published in the most distinguished philosophy journals, has indeed evolved toward the model that people usually outside philosophy complain about. My main idea in collecting these data was that we could gain some knowledge in an efficient and quantitatively tractable way about contemporary philosophy if we focus on how it is done rather than on what it consists of in terms of topics, theories, ideas, etc. For this reason, I collected several arrays of data on certain word frequencies, most of which arrays indicate the writing style in mainstream philosophy, and one of which indicates, to some extent, communication with some social sciences.

Let me introduce at this point several disclaimers in order to avoid potential misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what exactly my collected data show and what they fail to show, or are not intended to show. First, as it will be apparent, my data are limited to a small group of so-called "elite" philosophy journals. This means that I do not intend to extrapolate these data, and whatever they show, to the whole field of philosophy publishing, which is several times greater in size. More to the point, for example, I have not checked, for now, whether the same tendencies are present in certain other styles of philosophizing, like Continental philosophy, or in certain historical traditions, like American pragmatism or post- and neo-Kantianism, or, for that matter, in more clearly historically oriented specialties of philosophy, like Plato scholarship, Spinoza scholarship, etc. In fact, based on anecdotal evidence, I think these results are likely to fail to be extrapolated to the above

mentioned subfields, specialties, and styles of philosophy. However, to establish such a claim, one needs to undertake a lot more comparative research—a task that I intend to pursue in the near future, with an enriched methodology (e.g., more variables, more cross-journal and cross-subfield comparisons, a combination of quantitative and qualitative treatments of data, etc.). Second, it might well be true that what one could get similar results, as the ones I will present here, as far as other humanities or social sciences are concerned. Again, this needs considerably more effort, both on the side of data collection and on that of methodology. Finally, it is also consistent with the data presented here that analytic philosophy might have not estranged itself from “the world” but might have only gotten closer to the way the hard sciences approach the issues, hence, as in effect some people claim nowadays, it has become a more empirical field of knowledge, largely drawing on the results of physics, chemistry, or biology. Again, a rough view of the big picture indicates something close to this view, especially the emergence of more specialized journals that explicitly state their preference for interdisciplinarity based on interaction with the hard sciences. However, the extent to which this might indeed constitute a real trend has not yet been established, to my knowledge. Consequently, there is a lot more work needed to be done in this area too.

To conclude, in what follows, the reader is encouraged to think about what these data really show, by keeping in mind the limitations that I have just tried to explain above. I believe that, even with those limitations in place, we obtain an interesting picture of the evolution of the content of some well-known journals, which at least can serve as food for thought and as a starting point for developing further, more elaborate studies.

It is well known that mainstream Anglo-American philosophy has a crisp, straightforward style, ideally based on very clear argumentation and prose. There is nothing wrong with this. On a personal note, let me mention that I myself am a writer involved exclusively in the philosophical endeavors in this tradition. However, one involved in academic philosophy might notice that the standard of clarity, which is supposed to apply to one's argumentation, has been transformed by some people into the fetish of stylistically desiccated prose. Instead of simply following the very good advice of trying to express one's arguments as clearly as possible (a matter of intellectual honesty, in my opinion), younger generations of philosophy writers tend to “overdo it,” that is, they tend to excise any trace of intellectual-cum-stylistic vivacity from their products. Such an attitude might even interfere with the conformity to the standard itself. As Timothy Williamson recently observes in the last chapter of his book *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (286), sometimes the mere fact that

one is aware that one is writing in the crisp, analytical tradition constitutes an excuse or a pretext for shabby work. I am no exception to Williamson's complaint, or, to avoid self-flagellation, I hope to be right in saying now that I *was no exception*, when a bit younger.

Let's turn then to the data. As it happens, the context of discovery is a different matter from the context of justification. I will not hide from the readers the way the idea of gathering some data occurred to me. First, I came across a passage written in 1951 by an important metaphysician and great stylist of the last century, Donald C. Williams<sup>1</sup> (thanks to the *Facebook* profile of a young metaphysician contemporary of ours, Laurie Paul, of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). I read it, and I immediately thought that it would be very, very hard to get such a piece of prose published today in a top journal. Here it goes:

The final motive for the attempt to consummate the fourth dimension of the manifold with the special perfection of passage is the vaguest but the most substantial and incorrigible. It is simply that we find passage that we are immediately and poignantly involved in the jerk and whoosh of process, the felt flow of one moment into the next. Here is the focus of being. Here is the shore whence the youngster watches the golden mornings swing toward him like serried bright breakers from the ocean of the future. Here is the flood on which the oldster wakes in the night to shudder at its swollen black torrent cascading him into the abyss. (Williams 465–66)

Impressive, isn't it? The other event that made me think about the issue was that in early 2010, a paper of mine was rejected by a top journal (six months later accepted by another top journal, fortunately), where one of the referees was positive, according to the editor (I never got to see the positive review, as the editor's main issue was to justify a rejection), but the other referee had a big issue with my style. He or she wrote: "In any case, whatever the merits of the author's argument might be deemed to be—and it certainly does seem to be a novel one—the obscurity and excessive length of the paper are still, in my view, fatal flaws in it."

Now, the truth is that the paper would subsequently be accepted, based on three referees' reports, by one of the most technical journals in our field, with the most "analytically minded" referees—the *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* (so much for "obscurity"), in a 30-percent longer version (so much for "excessive length"). What exactly was the referee's problem? Was it that, except building up the argument itself, which, as witnessed by the later acceptance of it by the *BJPS*, was all fine, I also used some fancy words, like

*Zeitgeist*, or the expression “conceptually frugal,” and some word play? My feeling is that the referee became prejudiced against the paper immediately after encountering such “stylistic profanation” at the very beginning of it. I cannot imagine what would have happened if I had submitted an earlier version of the paper, which contained reference to and quotes from Persian metaphysical poetry!

In any case, this is the story about the context of discovery. In order to operationalize my gut feelings, I have selected some expressions and checked the frequency of articles that contain them, published in the elite triumvirate of Anglo-American philosophy journals: *Mind*, *The Philosophical Review*, and *The Journal of Philosophy*. My main source was JSTOR.<sup>2</sup> These three journals are also the oldest professional, peer-reviewed publications in our field, and the ones that are most frequently at the very top in various rankings (journal rankings or article rankings, for example, *The Philosopher’s Annual*, which selects the ten best papers each year, or the ISI citation index and Harzing’s *Publish or Perish* software). Another advantage is that, being so old, these journals are good sources for data collection from over a whole century. *Mind* published its first issue in 1876, *The Philosophical Review* in 1892, and *The Journal of Philosophy* in 1904. Overall, content that appeared in these journals over the last one hundred years or so gives us a pretty good reflection of the field as such, for instance about how what is considered elite contribution to the field has evolved in terms of writing style.

The first two series of data concern the cultural affinity and the extra-disciplinary affinity of the texts. For the first one, I have selected a list of fourteen famous literary authors and checked the number of articles (excluding book reviews) between 1911 and 2010 that mention any of these names. The list: Shakespeare, Molière, Racine, Balzac, Stendhal, Proust, Flaubert, Faulkner, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka, Goethe, and Dante Alighieri. The aggregated results for the three journals are presented in Fig. 1; for all graphs, each number on the time axis, namely, 0, 1, 2, . . . , is to be understood as corresponding to a decade. For instance, in Fig. 1, 0 corresponds to the interval 1911–1920, 1 corresponds to 1921–1930, and so on. As is apparent, there is a clear decline of such literary references in these journals over the last hundred years.

Next, for the variable “extra-disciplinary affinity of the texts,” I have checked the frequency of articles that mention either anthropology or sociology. Any reader of older issues of *Mind*, for instance, might have noticed that research in anthropology did have a place within philosophical debates during the early twentieth century. Anthropology and sociology are two so-

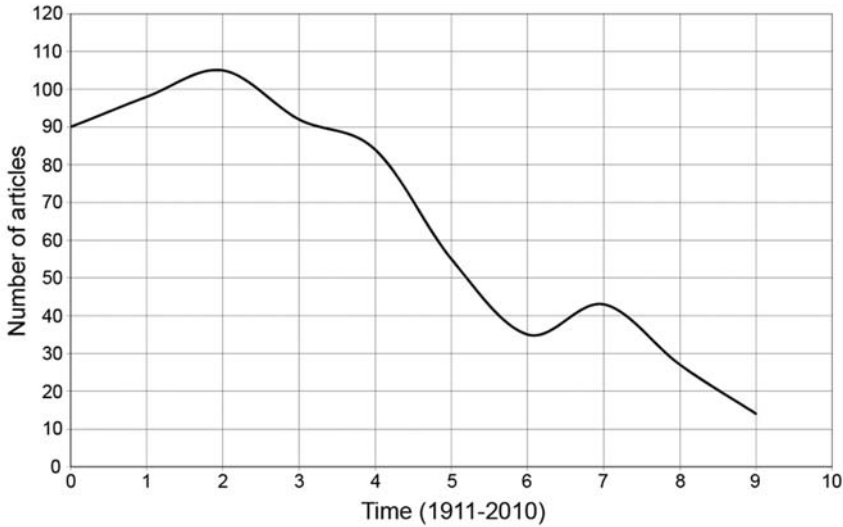


Fig. 1: Literary references: the mention of any of fourteen famous authors (in *Mind*, *Phil. Rev.*, and *J. Phil.*).

cial sciences that appear to have attracted philosophers some time ago, but this interest and attraction has faded over the years. See Fig. 2 for the period between 1901 and 2010.

Next, I was interested in a question that is also cultural, but it is more straightforwardly about prose. I have checked the number of articles that mention at least one of the following French expressions that are standard to use in humanities and social science prose: *faux pas*, *façon de parler*, *faute de mieux*, *par excellence*, *raison d'être* (see Fig. 3 for the time span of 1901–2010).

All three graphs show aggregated results for the three mentioned journals, but it is also true that there are no significant differences among the individual journals. Surprising or not, each of them has, for each of the arrays of the above data, very similar graphs to the aggregated ones. So these downward sloping lines are not the result of some anomaly of some journal or other; they are accurate mirrors of the evolution of the top of the field.

Finally, I will present two more graphs. These ones are based on data collected not only from the above mentioned journals, but from eighteen mainstream professional philosophy journals including the ones mentioned so far. The list: *Analysis*, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *Ethics*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, *Linguistics and Philosophy*, *Mind*, *Noûs*, *Philosophical Perspec-*

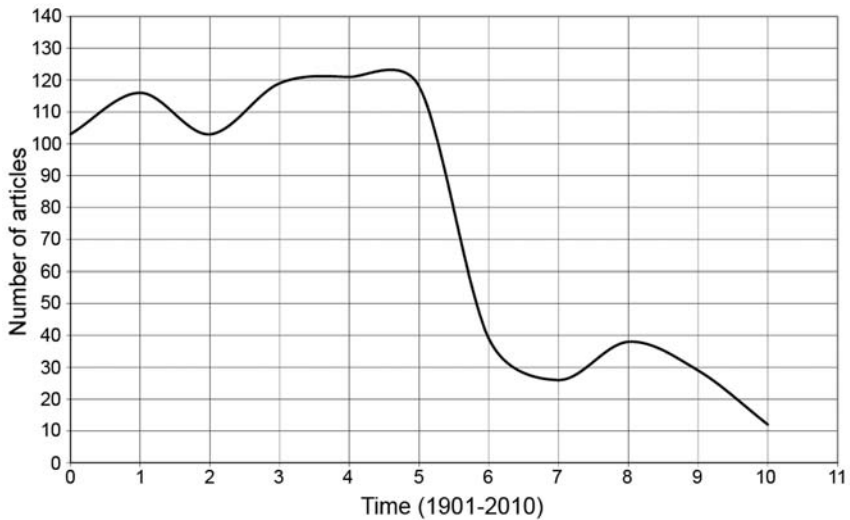


Fig. 2: Mention of “anthropology” or “sociology” (in *Mind*, *Phil. Rev.*, and *J. Phil.*).

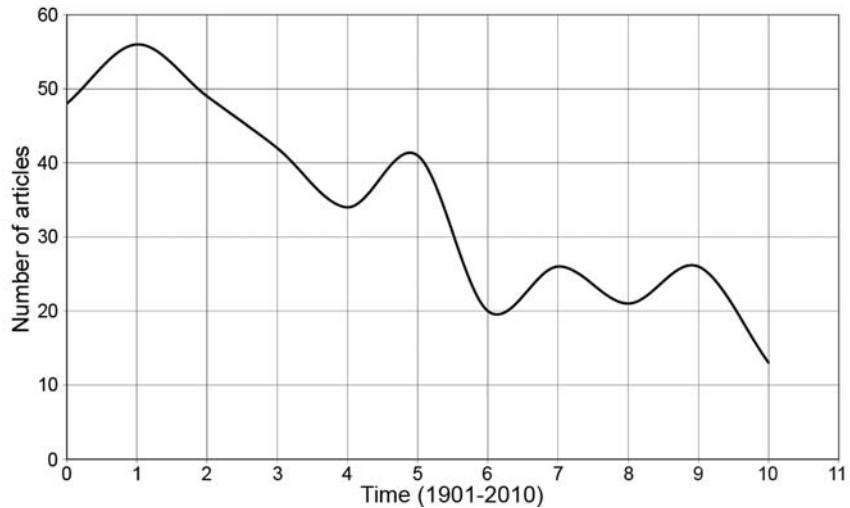


Fig. 3: Use of five standard French expressions overall (in *Mind*, *Phil. Rev.*, and *J. Phil.*).

*tives*, *Philosophical Issues*, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *Philosophical Review*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Philosophy*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Review of Metaphysics*, and *Synthese*.

One set of data that might seem almost frivolous to an outsider makes a lot of sense to us, the ones involved in research in the field. As my research interest is mainly metaphysics, I have, of course, been exposed countless times



to stories about Billy and Suzy. “Billy” and “Suzy” are completely arbitrary names that got stuck in the literature on causation; Suzy is also a character in parts of the literature on time travel, and she has even recently made it into a title of a paper.<sup>3</sup> Funny or not, my hypothesis was that Billy and Suzy are on the rise, whereas some more reputable individuals, like Brutus and Hamlet are increasingly out of favor with philosophers. If one considers the greatest thinkers of the last century, one has a hunch that in older times, philosophers used to care about whether their toy examples, thought experiments, or sample sentences to be analyzed—the typical tools of the analytic philosopher—had some socio-historical-cultural resonance. Davidson’s example of a causal statement is about Brutus stabbing Caesar, while Quine talks about Giorgione, that is, Barbarelli, the Italian painter, who was so called because of his size. Similar thoughts occur in connection with the fathers of analytic philosophy, like Frege and Russell. Nowadays, we seem not to care about relating our choice of names to be used in arbitrary sentences that we want to analyze to history or culture—perhaps another symptom of estrangement from the world and impoverishment of our style. Here is the graph that depicts the evolution of the occurrence of “Billy”<sup>4</sup> or “Suzy” as compared to that of the occurrence of “Brutus” or “Hamlet” (Fig. 4). The graph also depicts the difference between the number of occurrences between the two sets of data in the eighteen core journals; the time span is 1941–2010, as most of the journals started their career around 1940–1950. It is apparent that the data lines “Billy or Suzy” and “Brutus or Hamlet” are approaching one another, and if the trend continues, Suzy or Billy will become more notorious in the philosophical literature than Brutus or Hamlet.

Finally, as a crowning of our little adventure, I have computed a graph (Fig. 5) comparing the number of articles in the eighteen core journals containing occurrences of “poetry” and the number of those containing occurrences of “quantifier” over the period 1931–2010. The fact that the quantifier is on the rise should not be either surprising or unwelcome, but what about poetry?

Instead of a conclusion, which is not yet warranted, given that my data are quite rough, we can at least start thinking about some issues related to the factors that shape philosophy in its actual, *de facto* practice. I do not want to fall into the trap of some critics who are outside our discipline or who profess something extremely different under the same name as that of our discipline, which is to demean the way we do philosophy in its essence. I think we do it the right way in its essence. Still, we might at least raise the issue of how to cultivate philosophical writing that is both clear and delightful to read, if they are both desirable and if the latter is indeed in decline.

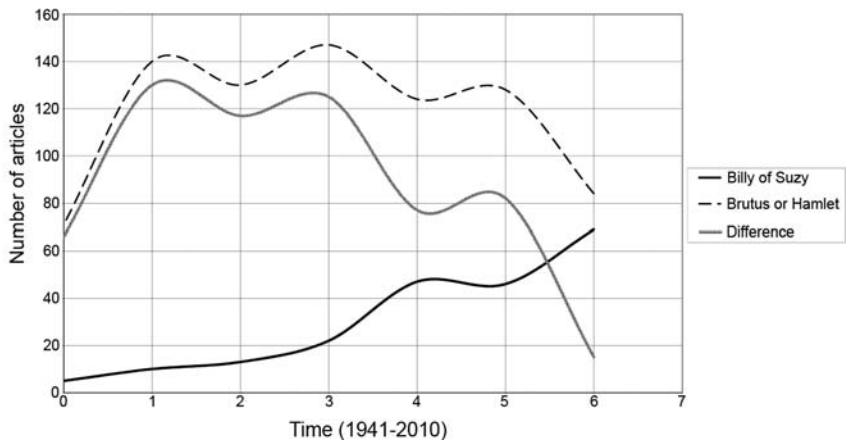


Fig. 4: Use of “Billy” or “Suzy” vs. “Brutus” or “Hamlet” in eighteen core philosophy journals.

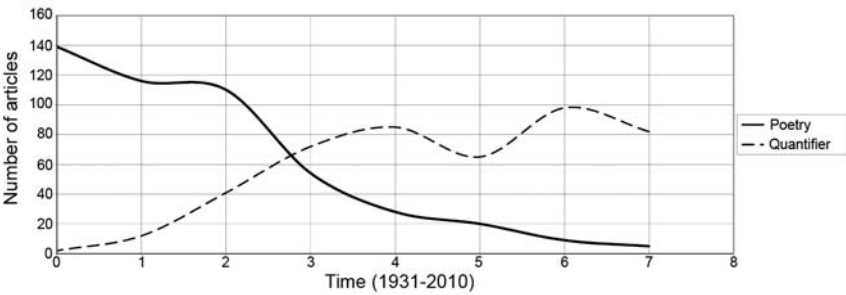


Fig. 5: Mention of “poetry” vs. “quantifier” in eighteen core philosophy journals.

NOTES

I would like to thank two anonymous referees, as well as the Editor of *The Pluralist*, for valuable feedback on a penultimate version of this paper. I would also like to acknowledge the continued financial support for my research by TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey) over the last few years. Last but not least, I am grateful to Juliana Acosta López de Mesa for supporting research, namely, double-checking my data as well as undertaking a separate data collection with a different counting method (occurrences of the search terms, each taken separately, rather than searching for the disjunction of all of them), thereby finding more support for the very same trends that are displayed in my graphs. Both my and Juliana’s raw data are kept on file at the Editorial Office of *The Pluralist*.

1. I am unpleasantly surprised that, when I am writing this, there is no *Wikipedia* entry whatsoever on D. C. Williams, a first-rate thinker and writer.

2. JSTOR (<http://www.jstor.org/>) contains data up to and including 2007 (and up to 2009 for *Mind*). I have completed the data sets for 2008–2010, whenever possible, with items obtained via the search engines of the journals themselves. The figures for these latest three years might appear somewhat lower than in reality, but the magnitude of the difference is negligible given that we depict data from over one hundred years.

3. See Kiourti.

4. The search excluded the name “Budd,” so we could exclude occurrences of “Billy Budd,” which has cultural resonance with literature, film, and opera.

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